This exhibition is the result of Homer Sykes' project of documenting the state of traditional British calendar customs; a task that possibly only Sir Benjamin Stone, at the turn of the century, has accomplished so thoroughly. Although Homer has taken five years over this, the problem is that the customs only happen once a year. So although in theory he gave himself plenty of time, in practice he only had a day a year, and a very great deal of travelling in between. It's a bonus if he happened to come up with that very special photograph once in a while, and it may be the simple test of a successful photograph that it fascinates you enough to read the text, which, both in the exhibition and the book 'Once a Year' are written by Homer.

There can be little doubt that his photographs and text will make a highly enlightening and informative touring exhibition, as there can hardly be a place his camera has not reached. There is also the strong possibility that the show will help to encourage surviving practitioners of the customs.

Although the exhibition has been designed by Arnolfini Gallery to be toured by the Arts Council of Great Britain, it is one of the first specifically organised by an independent gallery with the aid of a special grant. However, exhibitions tend sometimes to have rather more curious beginnings, and my own introduction to Homer's work was, rightly enough, not seeing his well-reproduced photographs in a specialist camera magazine but because of a shared interest; I happened to be standing next to him whilst I was watching, and he photographing, the Bacup Coconut Dancers in the rain on the edge of Bacup in Lancashire.

Clive Adams
Exhibition Organiser
Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol

Introduction

Shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve, a band of men wearing home-made fancy dress and carrying barrels full of burning tar, circle a bonfire in the Market Place at Allendale, Northumberland. These 'guisers' as the men are known locally, light the bonfire by throwing in some of the blazing barrels, then, as midnight strikes, join with the watching crowd in singing 'Auld Lang Syne'. When the flames have died down, the guisers go 'first footing' to various houses in the village.

This ceremony is only one of a wide variety of customs performed in the British Isles at specific times during the course of the year. Such events are often referred to as 'Calendar Customs' and their continuance reflects the human need to follow or maintain a pattern of existence. Although the urge to have predictable elements in community life is general, however, the forms in which this finds expression are, as the photographs in the Exhibition demonstrate, innumerable.

This multiplicity of forms means that the 'typical' calendar custom is unknown. Some customs, such as the Castleton Garland Ceremony are entirely unique. These idiosyncratic forms, however, can be contrasted with the associated groups of traditions which are practised in variant forms throughout the British Isles. Beating the bounds ceremonies, for example, although associated with different times of year in different places, all have the intent of defining and perpetuating the extent of a particular piece of land. The parish church of Saint Michael's, Oxford, has an unbroken record of beating the bounds since 1428. Here, after Holy Communion on Ascension Day, the parish priest, choir master, choir boys and parishioners tour the twenty-two parish boundary stones. At each one, the priest calls out 'Mark' which is repeated by the choir as they beat the stone with long garden canes. When the priest calls 'Ceasefire', the choir moves on and the parishioners mark the stone.

Bacup Coconut Dancers, Lancashire

This form of the custom can be compared with the ceremony which takes place triennially in Rogation Week at Tower Liberty, an enclosed area adjacent to the Tower of London. After a special service at the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula, a procession including the Chief Warder, chaplain, chapel choir and other Tower officers visits each of the thirty-one boundary stones. At each stone, the Chief Warder raises his mace as a sign for the procession to halt. The chaplain then calls 'Cursed be he who moves his neighbour's landmark' and the Chief Warder tells the choir 'Whack it, boys, whack it'. The boys then beat the stone with canes until ordered to halt.

Although calendar customs are, by definition, associated with particular dates – this association can take a number of different forms. Some customs, such as the Allendale Tar Barrel Parade, which takes place annually on New Year's Eve, have specific dates. Others occur at regulated intervals – as in the case of the daily blowing of the curfew at Ripon or the distribution of the Fern Street Settlement 'Farthing Bundles' on alternate Saturdays.

The date of occurrence of some traditions is less defined. These types of calendar custom are usually performed either during a specific period of the year, as with the Aldermaston Candle Auction, which takes place triennially during December or on what could be termed 'associated days'. An example of such a custom is the Yarnton West Mead Meadow Mowing Rights which takes place annually on the first Monday after St Peter's Day. Wooden balls, marked with the names Boat, Bolton, Harry, Freeman, White, Watery Molly, William of Bladon, Rothe, Dunn, Green, Gilbert, Walter Geoffry, Parry and the Tidals are allotted between the farmers who bought rights to the meadow at a previous auction. A ball is drawn and the meadow divided depending on the name on the ball and the number of mowing rights the farmer has bought.

One question which is always asked of such customs is, how did they originate? In some cases, documentary evidence about a custom is available. This is particularly true of traditions related to civic or religious institutions or those which have evolved from personal bequests. The John Knill Ceremony is an example of such a custom which has been maintained since the late eighteenth century.

In his will, Knill made provision that every five years on St James' day (25th July), ten young girls should be paid £5 to dance for fifteen minutes in front of the mausoleum he built for himself on Worvas Hill outside St Ives. This was to be followed by the singing of Psalm 100. Various other sums of money were also to be allotted to such persons as the best local netmaker or the best packer of pilchards.

The origins of customs such as the Bampton Mummers' Play are, however, most uncertain. This form of traditional play is still performed in many parts of the British Isles today, and although the plot has numerous local variations, it generally concerns a fight between two champions, one of whom is subsequently wounded or killed. A Doctor is then called for and he resurrects the fallen hero. This portrayal of death and and resurrection has led some scholars to put forward a pagan ritual employing sympathetic magic to ensure fertility as being the source of such traditions. In documentary terms, however, whilst the death and resurrection motif can be traced in the mythologies and religious cults of most civilisations, the earliest recorded text of a play of this type is as late as 1738. Because mummers' plays, and indeed most of the traditions recorded in these photographs were essentially performed within small communities, documentary evidence about their inception will necessarily be sparce. Consequently, statements concerning the origins of such customs must be approached with caution.

The difficulties of trying to discern the original nature of a custom from evidence based on its current performance is highlighted when the changes which can occur in the form of a particular tradition are examined. The annual Garland Ceremony at Castleton has undergone considerable alteration since its first full documentation in 1901. Until the late nineteenth century, the procession, which is the central feature of the ceremony, was accompanied by a team of morris dancers and headed by the Garland King, a rider covered by a beehive-shaped garland of flowers, and the Lady, a man dressed as a woman. After a number of transitions, such as the pageant period around 1920, when figures like Robin Hood

The John Knill Ceremony, St Ives, Cornwall

were incorporated into the procession, the ceremony has changed and its form been adapted. The part of the Lady, previously the man-woman figure common to customs such as the sword dance and traditional plays, is now taken by a girl, whilst the male morris dancers have been replaced by local schoolgirls in flower-trimmed dresses. A further innovation in the shape of a maypole dance was introduced in the 1920s and now forms an important part of the ceremony. Previously also, the 'Queen', or topmost posy on the garland was given to the wife of a local dignitary. After the 1914-18 War, however, this presentation was discontinued in favour of placing the flowers on the village war memorial at the conclusion of the procession. All of these changes have served to alter not only the form of the ceremony, but its overall effect within the village and on incoming visitors.

For the casual observer, the question of why, in the latter part of the twentieth century, people still take part in these apparently incongruous and antiquated activities must arise, especially as so many customs seem to serve little or no purpose. However, the fact that a particular custom has survived for many years implies that for the participants at least, customs are important. Perhaps one way to understand this is to regard customs as reinforcers of group or community identification. Therefore in taking part in customs, both as performers and audience, individuals have a focus for expressing their membership of the same society.

At the same time, calendar customs often have a special role in both the social and institutional life of the society within which they are performed. Many legislative events have, for instance, developed into distinct traditions. Beating the bounds at Oxford and the Yarnton Mowing Rights ceremony are customs dealing with ways of defining land, whilst the purpose of the John Knill ceremony is to fulfill the legal obligation of his bequest.

Another purpose of many customs is to collect rewards from the audience. These usually take the form of food, drink or money. The mummers at Bampton, for instance, collect money after their performances and spend it on refreshment. Occasionally, also, customs are performed with less immediate incentives in mind. At Carhampton in Somerset, for example, until recently the custom of wassailing apple trees was carried out to ensure a good crop in the following year. In a sense therefore, the identifiable purpose of the drive to obtain a pattern in community life which customs represents, is that of gratifying some physical and social need of the participants. Consequently, although many calendar customs may appear merely quaint and folksy, they are still a functioning part of many peoples' lives.

Change in traditions is frequently gradual, but ever present. In the future, it is likely that, like the Carhampton Wassailing and Ripon Sword Dance, many of the customs photographed for this exhibition will be discontinued, whilst others, like Castleton Garland will undergo further adaptation. It is also likely, however, that new customs, reflecting contemporary social and environmental conditions will evolve.

Exemplifying these new requirements are customs such as that of the 'Farthing Bundles', which takes place on alternate Saturdays at the Fern Street Settlement in London. Shocked by the deprivation among children in Bow at the turn of the century, a local headmistress, Miss Clara Grant, initiated an imaginative scheme for providing them with small toys. Every Saturday, she arranged for bundles of toys to be sold for a farthing to children who could walk under an arch 48 inches high. However, even this comparatively recent custom has been modified since its inception. Nowadays, reflecting improved standards of nutrition, the arch has been raised to 52 inches, and as a result of inflation, the cost of the bundles is now a new halfpenny. In considering the future of customs, therefore, perhaps we should muse on how tall will be the arch and how costly Fern Street's 'Farthing Bundles' in the year 2000.

Paul and Georgina Smith, 1977

Yarnton Meadow Mowing Rights, Oxfordshire

Allendale Tar-Barrel Parade, Northumberland

Homer Sykes

1949 Born in Vancouver, Canada
1968-70 Photography course, The London College of Printing
1969 Three months' travel and photography, U.S.A.
1970 Start freelancing for various magazines and record companies
1971 Start of photographic documentation of Traditional British Customs
1972-73 Spend nine months travelling in America, Mexico and Central America
1973 Received a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain to document Traditional British Customs.
1975 Received a second grant from the Arts Council to finish the project.
1976 Contributing photographer to Paris based photographic agency, Viva.
1976 Co-author of children's book "Facts about a Pop Group", Paul MacCartney and Wings. Published by G. Whizzard Publications, Ltd.

Lives in London with wife and two children.

Exhibitions:
1971 Four Young British Photographers, The Photographers Gallery, London.
1971 Personal Views 1850-1970, a British Council Touring Exhibition.
1975 Young British Photographers, A Co-optic exhibition.
1976 Arles Photographic festival, France.

Publications:
Creative Camera International Year Book, 1975
Photo 13 (Italy). December 1973
Creative Camera. December 1971, March 1974
British Image I, published by Arts Council of Great Britain 1975
London Magazine (Vol. 17). May 1977

Book

One hundred photographs of over 80 British customs are included in Homer Sykes' book 'Once a Year'. The book also includes full details of the history and origin of all the customs. 'Once a Year – Some Traditional British Customs' is published by Gordon Fraser, 29-31 Fitzroy Road, London NW1. 1977

Exhibition

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List 33

Traditional British CALENDAR CUSTOMS

photographs by HOMER SYKES

Exhibition organised by
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the Arts Council of Great Britain

Castleton Garland Day, Derbyshire

Beating the Bounds, Oxford

The Haxey Hood Game, Humberside

Bampton Mummers, Oxfordshire